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SUBJECT: Street Merchants Protest in Downtown Dakar

11. (U) Summary: On November 21, protests by small-time street vendors frustrated by a decision from Senegalese President Abdoulaye Wade to remove their ubiquitous street stalls from the streets of Dakar bubbled over into violent demonstrations. On Friday 23 November Wade retreated saying that the vendors would be allowed to return to their stalls until the New Year. End Summary

12. (SBU) According to eye-witness accounts and police reports, a wave of spontaneous protests broke out in the downtown district of Colobane and its surrounding side streets and districts. The protesters, described mostly as young men, were protesting the (at-times violent) dismantling of their street stalls by the police at a time when the rising cost of living has made life very difficult for the average Senegalese. The protestors had planned to march to the Ministry of Interior (right next to the Embassy) but were thwarted by riot police, which led to a cat-and-mouse game between the protesters and the police. The protesters moved from district to district burning tires, tearing down street signs and throwing rocks at the police who were chasing them. Two government buildings including the town hall of the highly populated Medina district and the local headquarters of the state-owned electricity company, Senelec, were damaged by arson. The protesters were also planning to burn down the headquarters of the government-owned media company, RTS, but were blocked by Gendarmes who fired bullets in the air.

13. (SBU) Poloff went to the affected areas during the first day of demonstrations and observed that no shops were damaged or looted, although the next day Polcouns noted that a snack bar restaurant in the Mermoz district was damaged by arson. However, the level of force used by the police was clear as small stalls were smashed to pieces. Businesses came to a standstill as shops closed; there were very few cars on the streets. In reply to a question about what happened, a group of young men seemed supportive of the protesters and this, in fact, seemed to be the general mood in the street. There was no sense of fear and, while the streets themselves were empty, the pavements were full of people eagerly watching or waiting for action.

Wade Steps Back

14. (SBU) Faced with his first major protest since he became President in 2000, Wade on Friday 23 November stepped back from his decree and stated that street vendors would be allowed to return to their activities, at least until the New Year. On Monday, he followed this up by sending Minister for Women and Women's Enterprises Awa Ndiaye, to the main arteries of Dakar with a message to female street vendors who had their stalls destroyed that they would be compensated for their losses.

Comment

15. (SBU) These protests are not a surprise. People are angry at the

rising cost of living, and Wade's decision to displace street sellers without offering them an alternative site affects the pockets of people who already have very little. Meanwhile, the protests are not limited to street vendors, as students from a small university in Dakar took to the streets on Wednesday 28, November to protest unfulfilled promises that the government would introduce a Masters program at their college. Worse for Wade, is the fact that the protestors are the very people that have perennially supported him as he has long been seen as the champion of the poor. If he is unable to find a means of mollifying the restive public mood, it is unlikely that these demonstrations and disturbances will be the last. The disconnect between the state and the people is further evidenced by a statement made by the Minister of Finance, Abdoulaye Diop, during a discussion on the budget when he said that he is in the process of thinking about how Senegal can purchase a new presidential plane, a plane which he calls a matter of sovereignty and pride for the country. He went on to point out countries that are poorer than Senegal have a presidential plane, overlooking the fact that often it is these very same states that end up suffering from civil unrest as a result of popular resentment of the political elite. These events appear to be the latest manifestation of the leadership's seeming estrangement from the prevailing public mood. End comment.

SMITH